

Back Again, Back Again: The Beginning and the End

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode one: the Beginning and the End.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I don't even know how to begin.

Jesus christ. Why am I doing this? Who would listen, right? Who would believe me --

(Breath out, gasping.)

Shit. *Quonoc per domi*. This is home -- no this is -- no. I just --

(In full voice) I'm seventeen again. And that's... wrong.

I'm sorry. I don't know where to begin.

I used to be -- more. I think. Unless it was all a dream. Unless it was all just -- it couldn't've been --

It's September twenty-fourth, two thousand nineteen. I'm seventeen. I turned out my lights at eleven thirty-eight and fell asleep a handful of minutes before midnight and then I woke up at twelve-o-three and five years had passed, but not here. I was -- somewhere else -- and I was a king.

And -- And I'm not making any sense. I -- I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Sorry. Let me try again.

Do you know *The Hobbit*? Bilbo wrote a book of his adventure, mentioned more in Fellowship but that's semantics. *There and Back Again: A Hobbit's Tale*.

Now... I'm going to recount everything. Like -- like Bilbo. Because I don't want to forget. Because I want the world to know, even if they know nothing else about me. Because it all seems less like a -- fever dream written down. Because who else would believe me? Who else would believe everything I've seen? Who else would -- listen?

Even if there's no one out there. I just -- want to think someone is listening.

I'll call it -- (laughs/snorts) I'll call it -- *There and Back Again: A Lost Girl's Tale*.

There and Back Again: A King's Tale.

No. No -- that's stupid.

How about just...

Back Again, Back Again.

Fitting. I guess.

I'm still not making any sense.

I went to sleep a handful of minutes before midnight. It's Georgia, and September, and that means it's still ninety degrees. It was ninety-four yesterday. This-yesterday. Here-yesterday. I had to check the weather -- I couldn't remember exactly. I just remembered hot as balls. So -- I didn't wear pants to sleep which sounds weird until you've been to Georgia. It's sticky-walls humid, which shouldn't even be legal, but weather doesn't abide by mortal legalities.

No pants. Just an oversized t-shirt I'd gotten at a thrift store with The Hobbit logo done on it in black, the t-shirt an ugly golden-yellow color.

This is important. Not protag-mirror-description exposition. Because -- when I woke up at twelve-o-three, I was in battle clothes. Leather pants and a linen shirt and a leather breastplate and bracers. They were bloodstained and half-ruined. I was breathing hard and light-headed in the way you are right after you get done screaming. There had been a battle. We had won. I had just won and then I got stabbed and I opened my mouth to scream and --

It was twelve-o-three. I was seventeen where I used to be twenty-three.

I used to be twenty-three.

Because... gods, it sounds so stupid saying it. I can't believe that I'm saying this -- but it can't've been fake -- it couldn't've just been a dream, dreams aren't *this real*.

Five minutes or something-close passed here, in this world. But I was... somewhere different. I was Narnia-ed through a doorway in space-time or -- really -- was more lucky than I've been in my entire life, and I was Somewhere Else. Capitalized, emphasized.

We call it Rhysea. I don't know how I got there, but this is my call to find home. This is me screaming into the void and hoping the void screams back, somehow. This is me begging to go back. And... this is me trying to not forget.

(Sigh) The point is, when I woke up, I was here. In clothes that were not-from-here in a body that was only sort-of from here, but -- here. I freaked out and took a midnight shower and

hid in the shower in my bloody clothes from Elsewhere while my father knocked on the door, asking why I was awake and in the shower at midnight on a school night. He wished me a happy birthday, ironically, in the sort of tone that implied he wished he hadn't been awake to be able to have done that.

I'd almost forgotten what his voice had sounded like. Hearing it was a -- shock. A memory, half buried.

It couldn't have been a dream.

And you don't care about what came after. How blankly I walked through school on my second seventeenth birthday, how teachers I didn't remember the names of asked me if I was alright because *I was never this quiet, this downtrodden, why wasn't I answering their questions in class? Why didn't I have my homework? My backpack?*

I'd left it at home. It hadn't seemed important.

What was important -- what is, *is* important, is my dr--. Not-dream. Is Rhysea. Is the magic that no longer hums through my body where it used to be so certain.

I fell asleep just before midnight. I woke up on a dirt road in the pouring rain with a horse bearing down on me. I yelped and tumbled off the road -- into a ditch full of nasty mud-water that reeked like shit and dead things. The cart-driver yelled at me as he barreled by, words indistinguishable amid the pounding of the rain and the pounding of my heart, echoing in my ears.

This was not Georgia. The trees were all the wrong sorts, too ancient and vast and it was much too cold -- summer balminess lacking the oppressive heat I'd come to know. It felt

like the northwest. It smelled like a back alley. It was the middle of the goddamned morning.

A *dream*, I'd thought. It had seemed like a dream at first -- everything off just enough to be odd. It felt like a dream, in that way -- your surroundings not quite how reality otherwise behaved, in the waking world, a shade too silver, nothing in perfect focus until you force your brain to *look*. Like thinking through molasses. Like running and getting nowhere, like not being able to control your body. I'm a lucid dreamer, here in this world. Thinking *this is a dream* isn't a sign of consciousness.

But I could feel the rain -- it didn't slide off my skin or leave vague static in place of true sensation. The ditch-water soaking into my shirt was disgustingly present, the rain drumming onto my scalp and the bridge of my nose the same way it did in the middle of a thunderstorm. Though I can't ever smell things in my dreams, the smell of refuse was overpowering. I stumbled out of the ditch and back onto the road.

It was completely deserted. Anyone with sense wasn't out in the pouring rain.

The second hint of not-here was a lack of something, rather than the presence of. It took me too long to realize -- it's harder to notice something's missing than it is to identify an oddity. See, no Chick-Fil-A cups or wal-mart bags blew across the road. No mile markers or road signs on metal posts scattered themselves along the sides, announcing *you are here, you are here*.

And the third thing --

Not knowing what else to do, pantsless in the pouring rain, I started to walk. When you're sopping wet, dear listener, with hair sticking to your face and mud covering your feet and your thighs starting to chafe in a way you couldn't believe they had the audacity to do, time suspends itself in a way that's not quite fair. I slogged along, becoming less and less convinced this all was a dream, because my subconscious wasn't clever enough to dream up *thigh chafing*, for gods' sake, for longer than I wanted but likely less time than I made it out to be, until I came to a fork in the road, a division off of what-was. To the left, more open road, for as far as I could see until the not-right trees and thick rain swallowed up the path. On the right, lining the road between clumps of trees and patches of farm, a collection of houses -- though *cottages* might have been a better word. A way out of the rain.

I ended up in a family's backyard, their laundry strung on clotheslines across the yard, forgotten to the storm. Guilt bubbled up as the idea of stealing from them cemented itself in my mind, and I hesitated before swallowing it down and instead praying the reason they hadn't pulled the clothes in -- all in a peasant-from-a-fantasy-novel sort of style -- was because they weren't home. Those clothes -- another sign I wasn't home, another sign, by the detail that I hadn't dreamt them up. Nothing was that detailed in my dreams. That, and I hadn't been able to will the rain to stop via god powers of lucid dreaming.

It was somewhere in that moment I started to realize that I was in a place completely foreign to everything I'd known. Anxiety replaced annoyance until that, too, started to sap to a

sort of incredulous excitement, even as the rain pounded down and I could still smell shit water on my clothes.

This wasn't my world. Not anything I'd ever heard of or seen. Escape from mundanity was all I'd ever wanted, and now here was a promise of some sort of adventure. Here was some sort of Narnia, some sort of new world to discover.

I was pulling down a dress that looked roughly my size when the back door to the cottage swung open. A woman stood in the doorway, laundry basket on her hip. It clattered to the ground when she saw me, and I tensed, preparing to run.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out.
"Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role that no one else can fill but you. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.